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To cite this article: Nguyen Cong Tung (2022) US-China COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy competition in Vietnam: where vaccines go, influence may follow, Australian Journal of International Affairs, 76:6, 653-671, DOI: [10.1080/10357718.2022.2077302](https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2077302)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2077302>



Published online: 18 May 2022.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



US-China COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy competition in Vietnam: where vaccines go, influence may follow

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy of the United States and China in Vietnam and conceptualises Hanoi's practical responses. The deployment of vaccine diplomacy is closely associated with US-China strategic rivalry and is thus labelled as proxy competition in this paper. This paper found that both Washington and Beijing leveraged vaccine diplomacy to achieve general strategic objectives and specific foreign policy objectives in relations with Vietnam. For the USA, vaccine donation consolidated Hanoi's strategic trust in Washington during tough times. Meanwhile, despite widespread mistrust and suspicion regarding the quality and efficacy of Chinese-made vaccines amongst Vietnamese people, China's vaccine donation to Vietnam could still prevent Hanoi from further spiraling into the US-led anti-China coalition. Nevertheless, Vietnam has constantly been at a crossroads, for it not only strives to respond reasonably to the USA and China at the international level but also has to accommodate the Vietnamese public's policy preferences at the domestic level.

KEYWORDS

Vaccine diplomacy; the United States; China; Vietnam; proxy competition

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic since the end of 2019 has been wreaking havoc across the globe. This new disease has not only adversely affected all socio-economic aspects, cost the lives of millions of people worldwide, but also tremendously influenced interactions amongst countries, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Among those, US-China relations, which were at their worst for decades under the Trump administration, have sharply deteriorated since the pandemic (deLisle 2021). In the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, Washington and Beijing quickly spiralled into a 'blame game' over a plethora of issues, which drew great attention globally. The US-led Western countries accused Chinese authorities of mishandling the pandemic and deliberately concealing information relating to the coronavirus in the early stages, causing the afterward global expansion, while China steadfastly rejected these accusations and was less reluctant to deploy 'wolf warrior' diplomacy to oppose to criticism and suspicions of other countries. As such, competition and mistrust were pervasive in the international area

(deLisle 2021; Kampfner 2021). Indeed, far from prompting greater collaboration, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated global rivalries between Washington and Beijing.

In addition to mutual distrust, both sides see the ongoing pandemic as an opportunity to compete for influence. As China's domestic pandemic was gradually curbed, it started donating masks and personal protective equipment to the world. Later, China kicked off its 'vaccine diplomacy' to many developing countries in early 2021 after its domestically produced COVID-19 vaccines had been successfully made. As a result, China demonstrated itself as a responsible global leader (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021). In stark contrast, while China was deploying its 'mask diplomacy,' the USA witnessed the world's highest infection rate in the final year of US President Donald Trump. As President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, the situation in the USA was curbed by its impressively fast domestic vaccination programme. However, it was not until May 2021 that the USA entered the vaccine diplomacy race with China when Biden announced a plan to distribute 80 million COVID-19 vaccine doses worldwide (US Department of State 2022).

As a result, the vaccine issue quickly became a new competition arena for the two giants. On the one hand, Washington and Beijing have shown little willingness in vaccine collaboration to eradicate the pandemic. On the other hand, both seek to capitalise on vaccines and vaccine manufacturing technology to either consolidate their existing network of relationships or gain more support from in-between states. This nascent battle is especially prominent in Southeast Asia, which is home to many swing states but strategically important to both the USA and China (Zaini 2021). Among those, Vietnam is the one that attracts significant attention from both sides given Hanoi's relevance and importance to the regional strategy of each. Vaccine donations to Vietnam are thus leveraged to seek Hanoi's endorsement and support on a wide range of political and security issues.

The USA and China have so far been amongst Vietnam's major vaccine donors. By the end of April 2022, the USA has donated nearly 40 million vaccine doses to Vietnam, while China's donation was 7.3 million doses (Tuoi Tre 2022). Given this, this paper aims to address two crucial questions including how US-China vaccine diplomacy works in Vietnam, and how Vietnam has responded to the two major powers' vaccine diplomacy. These two questions are separate but complementary. That said, Vietnam's reception of and practical responses to US-China vaccine donations can reflect whether and how vaccine diplomacy works. In other words, as an increasingly influential nation in regional economic and security architecture, Vietnam's reception of US-China vaccine donations can be used to assess the overall success of vaccine diplomacy. Hence, the analytical focus of this paper is on reception and responses from Vietnam.

This paper found that the USA and China are both leveraging vaccine diplomacy to achieve general strategic objectives and specific foreign policy objectives in Vietnam. For the USA, vaccine diplomacy helped to generate strategic trust between Washington and Hanoi. When Vietnam received vaccine donation from the USA, it hailed the rapid development of bilateral relations and depicted the USA as its crucial partner. At the same time, vaccine diplomacy also pushed the US specific foreign policy objectives *vis-à-vis* Vietnam, particularly in terms of trade and economic activities. For China, vaccine donation to Vietnam gained Hanoi's reassurance of not aligning with other external forces against China.

Vietnam's responses to the generosity from the USA and China could, to some extent, satisfy both Washington and Beijing as Hanoi has not vocalised total support for either side. Nevertheless, Vietnam's degree of receptiveness to vaccine donations from the USA and China is slightly different. Particularly, Hanoi seems to be more enthusiastic about receiving and using US-made vaccines, while maintaining a more cautious and incremental attitude toward Chinese-made vaccines. This is driven by both structural factors and domestic factors. Structurally, Hanoi had to gradually ratify and receive Chinese vaccines in an attempt to balance Washington and Beijing's competition for influence in the country and to keep China's face despite its preference for Western-made vaccines. Domestically, widespread anti-China sentiment during the pandemic as well as consequential anti-Chinese vaccine sentiment forced Hanoi to seek more US-made vaccines and try to downplay the significance of Chinese vaccine donation to Vietnam to ease the public's suspicions.

The contribution of this paper to the existing literature is twofold. First, the paper expanded discussions on vaccine diplomacy and broader health diplomacy in international relations. It used the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine donations to investigate wider geopolitical issues, and regarded the ongoing vaccine diplomacy as a proxy competition between the USA and China. Second, the paper added to the understanding of lesser powers' foreign policy and strategy amid great powers' rivalry by investigating Vietnam's practical responses to US-China vaccine diplomacy. While existing literature argued that Vietnam's hedging strategy is being eroded given intense US-China rivalry (Tung 2021, 5–7); Hanoi's preliminary responses to the ongoing vaccine diplomacy competition show a different tendency. Although the USA and China are both using their vaccine donations to compete for influence in Vietnam, Hanoi could still engage in its long-term hedging strategy and manage relations with the USA and China relatively well during the pandemic. This reveals that, in times of great powers' rivalry, lesser powers could still have space to manoeuvre in terms of health-related issues.

The paper proceeds in five sections. The first section introduces the research background and research questions. The second summarises the existing literature that deals with vaccine diplomacy and US-China competition regarding this issue. In the third section, this paper specifically discusses US-China vaccine donations to Vietnam and how their proxy competition has been manifested. The fourth section elaborates on Hanoi's practical responses to the ongoing proxy competition waged through vaccine donations. The conclusion sums up the main findings of this paper and offers some policy implications.

Vaccine diplomacy as a proxy competition

When it comes to the nature of a pandemic, international cooperation for the sake of global health is often needed. However, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has also given relevant countries opportunities to pursue their own foreign policy goals. As such, countries, particularly those wealthy and developed ones may capitalise on international health aid to promote their non-health-related ends (Fazal 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, international health aid refers to the donations of masks, health facilities, vaccines, and even technology transfers. Among those, since

vaccines are considered the fastest and most cost-effective way to bring the world back to normal, it has, to a certain degree, become a strategic asset in the hands of several countries that possess abundant vaccine supplies and vaccine manufacturing technology (Halabi and Rutschman 2021). It thus gives rise to the issue of vaccine diplomacy in contemporary international affairs.

Borrowing insights from extant literature, vaccine diplomacy, a sub-branch of health diplomacy, can be defined in many ways. From the perspective of international cooperation, vaccine diplomacy can be understood as a nation's vaccine efforts aiming to build mutually beneficial relationships with others (Su *et al.* 2021, 5–6). From the realist perspective, vaccine diplomacy entails a country's leveraging its ability to produce and distribute vaccines to other countries' populations with the view of achieving political purposes (McDonagh 2021, 9). This paper takes a realist perspective on vaccine diplomacy and contends that the current vaccine diplomacy race must be viewed from a larger context of intensifying US-China multi-layered strategic rivalry.

In reality, the approaches to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as vaccine donation and distribution issues by the USA and China are different in many ways, which reflect their underlying geopolitical and economic tensions. Rather than pooling resources to mass produce the most effective vaccines for the world, the USA and China competed to produce and distribute their own vaccines separately (McDonagh 2021). Given this, this paper assumes that vaccine diplomacy has evolved into a 'proxy competition' between the two giants as Washington and Beijing are leveraging the COVID-19 vaccine as a strategic asset at hand to compete for influence worldwide and demonstrate themselves as responsible global leaders in the provision of global public goods.

This paper attempts to define proxy competition waged through vaccine diplomacy in two ways. First, there is no or little direct competition between Washington and Beijing within each side's territory regarding COVID-19 vaccine-related issues. Rather, both tend to divert their battle to another third country. That said, the USA and China, through donating vaccines to an in-between state, either bilaterally or via multilateral mechanisms such as COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) in the name of themselves, may seek to compete for influence there for this country's support on a wide range of other political and security issues. Second, proxy competition also entails capitalising on a network of allies, friends, and partners to implement vaccine diplomacy. With this regard, the USA has engaged European countries, Australia, and Japan in its deployment of global vaccine diplomacy; meanwhile, China has also sought to beef up international cooperation in Chinese vaccine manufacturing, distribution and donation with several 'friendly states' in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.

Since the targets of US-China proxy competition waged through vaccine diplomacy are in-between states in need of vaccines, its success or effectiveness should be evaluated by how these vaccine recipient states perceive and respond to vaccine donations from Washington and Beijing. Simply put, vaccine recipients' degree of receptiveness or reception regarding US-China vaccine donations reflects the overall success of vaccine diplomacy. In this paper, the degree of receptiveness or reception rests on several criteria including a recipient country's taking initiative in lobbying or asking for more vaccines from the USA or China; the recipient country's state-society discrepancies toward US-made or Chinese-made vaccines; the recipient government's domestic handling of

donated vaccines from the USA and China, such as vaccine propaganda and distribution policy. More specifically, as a recipient state proactively and consistently requires vaccine donation and procurement from the USA or China, this denotes a higher degree of receptiveness toward US-made or Chinese-made vaccines. Meanwhile, state-society discrepancies might suggest a mixed reception of donated vaccines from the USA or China. Furthermore, a recipient government's selectively conducting propaganda programme toward a specific type of vaccine from the USA or China, while at the same time adjusting its vaccine distribution policy throughout the country, also reveals the reception situation within this recipient country. All of these criteria will be used in the fourth part of this paper to examine Vietnam's practical responses, and from this basis evaluate the effectiveness of US-China vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam.

Overall, there are both similarities and differences regarding US-China vaccine diplomacy in terms of their motivations, implementation methods, and donation numbers. The motivations of the US and China behind the current vaccine diplomacy competition might be diverse but identical in one sense: portraying themselves as global leaders and showing other countries their world vision as well as governance model. For the USA, the generous donation of vaccines to the world conveys a straightforward message, 'the US is back!' The USA was almost absent in the vaccine race in early 2021 due to its priority on its domestic vaccination programme. Yet, as the Biden administration announced its worldwide vaccine donation plan in May 2021 and pledged to re-take the leading role in the World Health Organization (WHO), this marked a sharp departure from the Trump administration's approach (Kampfner 2021). Eventually, this helps the USA gradually regain its international reputation and shows Washington's long-term commitment to its allies and partners as well.

Furthermore, via vaccine diplomacy, Washington expected to counter the growing influence of China. To this end, the USA sought to delegitimise the Chinese generous act by drawing a clear distinction between the approaches adopted by the USA and China to vaccine issues. In particular, the USA highlighted that US vaccine donations do not require any conditionality or concessions from recipient countries but only aim to end the pandemic as repeatedly stated by US President Biden and other US officials (White House 2021b). On the one hand, this demonstrates the US goodwill and benevolence; while on the other, it reminds other countries of China's intention or hidden agenda behind its vaccine donation.

For the Chinese side, accusations made by the USA and other Western governments regarding China's mishandling of the early outbreak in Wuhan city as well as its deliberate cover-up of information relating to the virus, have ravaged China's image on a global scale. Thus, the Chinese government felt a mission to revamp its image, and vaccine diplomacy has been first and foremost utilised as a crucial vehicle to attain this goal, contributing to shifting the narrative from its role in the cause of the pandemic. Apart from repairing the Chinese image, vaccines are also used to expand Beijing's great power ambitions, boost Chinese soft power and influence, and ultimately help Beijing easily get access to new economic and geopolitical opportunities in the recipient countries (Lee 2021).

More importantly, China showed its goodwill and acted as a saviour to many developing and poor countries left behind by the vaccine inequity, which drew a contrasting picture with the USA at the height of the global vaccine shortage. Chinese generous act,

in turn, can substantially weaken the US role as the world leader; and its tout even started infiltrating into areas where the US influence has long dominated (Hossain 2021, 3). For example, China's donation of vaccines to Latin America, which experienced vaccine scarcity, helped to cultivate Chinese soft power and increase local trust toward China (Elena *et al.* 2021). Yet, an exception was found in the case of several Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam as Chinese vaccine diplomacy did not substantially generate strategic trust there due to Beijing's increasing aggressiveness in other areas, particularly the South China Sea disputes (Zaini 2021, 8–9).

Regarding methods to conduct vaccine diplomacy, countries may choose to donate either bilaterally or multilaterally via sharing mechanisms such as the COVAX facility led by the WHO. When it is applied to the cases of the USA and China, the former chooses to share its vaccines both bilaterally and multilaterally, of which 13% of its donation is conducted bilaterally and 87% is delivered via COVAX by the end of April 2022 (U.S. Department of State 2022). Meanwhile, the latter prefers directly donating vaccines to recipient states. Having joined COVAX in October 2020, only 13.6% of China's vaccine deliveries has been made through COVAX by the end of April 2022 (Bridge Beijing 2022). Regarding the donation numbers, as the proxy competition through vaccine diplomacy heats up, the USA and China have distributed millions of COVID-19 vaccine doses worldwide. In September 2021, US President Joe Biden pledged to donate at least 1.1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine doses for global use. As of 29 April 2022, the total number of US doses donated globally exceeded 534 million (US Department of State 2022). In comparison, China has donated 229 million doses to developing countries as of 25 April 2022 (Bridge Beijing 2022).

During the US-China proxy competition, Southeast Asia is the key target for their deployment of vaccine diplomacy. China started luring Southeast Asia with the Chinese-made vaccines much earlier in 2020, hence having a first-mover advantage. As of 25 April 2022, China donated nearly 56.2 million Chinese-made vaccine doses to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), making up 24.54% of its vaccine donation globally (Bridge Beijing 2022, *the author's own statistics*). The USA, despite starting slower, is now striving to fill the previous vacuum. As of 29 April 2022, the USA has donated about 120.5 million vaccine doses to ASEAN members, accounting for 22.57% of its donation worldwide (US Department of State 2022, *the author's own statistics*). Among those, located in the heart of Southeast Asia, Vietnam has emerged as a front line amidst US-China vaccine diplomacy. Given the USA and China, both expect to gain Vietnam's support during their strategic rivalry, the US-China vaccine diplomacy competition has been occurring vividly on Vietnamese soil.

Deployment of US-China vaccine diplomacy as a proxy competition in Vietnam

Given the largest outbreak of the domestic pandemic since May 2021, vaccine-related issues and getting the population of 100 million people vaccinated have become the top priority among Vietnamese leaders. However, like many other developing countries, Vietnam struggled with the delays in ordering or securing pledges for deliveries of the needed vaccines due to global vaccine shortage and rich countries' hoarding of vaccines at the height of the pandemic during 2021. Notably, the rich countries' abundant sources

of vaccines stood in stark contrast with those in high need but unable to get access to vaccines. This phenomenon gave rise to the discussions regarding vaccine inequity, the re-emergence of the ‘viral sovereignty’ doctrine and vaccine nationalism, and the relatively weak role of the COVAX facility in ensuring global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines (Elbe 2022; Halabi and Rutschman 2021; Usher 2021).

Important though it seemed, these above-mentioned issues were less obvious in Vietnam than extant literature suggested. Vietnamese leaders were well aware of difficulties in getting access to vaccines; yet, they chose not to blame or criticise any country or the COVAX facility. Rather, Vietnam quickly adjusted its strategy by resorting to diplomatic lobbying with several major partners with abundant vaccine supplies to secure and obtain more vaccines. In a proactive move, on 13 August 2021, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh signed a decision on the establishment of a *Governmental Working Group on Vaccine Diplomacy*, assigning Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son to be the head of the Working Group. This Working Group has worked hard on negotiations with Vietnam’s major partners and international vaccine manufacturers on providing vaccines to Vietnam since its establishment (Bao Chinh Phu 2022).

During the second half of 2021, Vietnamese President and Prime Minister actively sent letters and conducted telephone conversations with leaders of 22 countries and 10 international organisations, met with ambassadors, representatives of US and EU businesses in Vietnam to ask for more vaccines (Bao Chinh Phu 2022). As a result, the USA, Japan, European countries, Australia, China, and other partners respectively donated a considerable number of vaccines to Vietnam or prioritised the distribution of vaccines to the pandemic-hit country. As of the end of April 2022, about 86 million doses, roughly 37% of the total 231 million COVID-19 vaccine doses Vietnam received, were donated by other countries (Tuoi Tre 2022; Vietnam Ministry of Health 2022, *the author’s own statistics*). As such, if compared with other developing countries, Vietnam enjoyed great benefits from the global vaccine distribution and donation.

More particularly, as the pandemic in Vietnam reached its peak with growing death tolls from June to July 2021, Japan, China and the USA were among the first to donate vaccines to Vietnam. On 16 June 2021, the first batch of 1 million doses of Astra-Zeneca vaccine donated by Japan arrived in Hanoi (Vietnam Plus 2021a). Not long after that, on 20 June 2021, China donated 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to Vietnam. However, China required that their donated vaccines should be administered to a limited group of people including Chinese nationals living in Vietnam, Vietnamese people intending to go to work or study in China, and residents in the border region with China (Quang Minh 2021). On 10 July 2021, two million doses of Moderna vaccine donated by the USA through the COVAX facility arrived in Hanoi, kicking off the US donation of vaccines to Vietnam in the following months (Minh Nga 2021).

Concerning vaccine donations from the USA and China to Vietnam, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) took the main responsibilities in organising, coordinating and allocating COVID-19 vaccine donation and other health assistance to Vietnam during the outbreak of the pandemic (US Agency for International Development 2022). However, there was no such an overall department in charge of vaccine donation to Vietnam in the case of China. Rather, Chinese-made vaccines were scatteredly donated by the Chinese central government, several provinces bordered by Vietnam, or even the People’s Liberation Army of China (Tuoi Tre 2022). That

signifies a fundamental difference in the organisational structure in implementing vaccine diplomacy in Hanoi between Washington and Beijing.

As mentioned above, US-China vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam represents a proxy competition between these two giants on Vietnamese soil. As such, regarding specific approaches, this proxy competition was also conducted in two main ways similar to the situation in other in-between states. First, the USA and China, in the name of themselves, donated vaccines and transferred vaccine manufacturing technology, either bilaterally or via international efforts such as the COVAX facility, to compete for influence in Vietnam. Second, the USA and China capitalised on each side's network of allies, friends, and partners to implement their vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam. Strikingly, at the peak of the proxy competition, after one announcement of vaccine donation to Vietnam made by one particular party (either the USA or China), immediately came another likewise announcement of donation delivered by the other. That demonstrates that the intensifying strategic rivalry between the USA and China was emphatically underscored by their competition in vaccine donations to Vietnam.

For the first approach, US-China proxy competition via vaccine diplomacy is particularly conspicuous as both seek to demonstrate that either of them is a trusted partner of Vietnam. One prominent example showcasing this intense competition happened during the visit of US Vice President Kamala Harris to Vietnam on 24 August 2021. Harris's visit was expected to further advance US-Vietnam relations and bring more US vaccines to Vietnam during that difficult time. China obviously smelt that, and only one day previously on 23 August, the news of a flight landing at Hanoi, which carried 200,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine donated to the People's Army of Vietnam from the People's Liberation Army of China, was reported by Vietnamese media and was posted on the Facebook fanpage of Chinese Embassy in Vietnam (Vietnam News Agency 2021).

More dramatically, just two hours before Harris's landing on Hanoi on late 24 August, Beijing quickly dispatched its Chinese ambassador in Hanoi, Xiong Bo to meet with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and pledged a donation of 2 million Sinopharm vaccine doses, undercutting the US announcement of a donation of additional 1 million Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine doses to Hanoi (Mahtani 2021). On the following day, Harris participated in the opening of a new regional Center for Disease Control (CDC) office in Hanoi, one of the four regional CDC offices in the world, and also the largest in Southeast Asia (BBC Vietnamese 2021).

So far, the United States has been Vietnam's biggest vaccine donor. As of the end of April 2022, the USA has, through the COVAX facility, donated nearly 40 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Vietnam, of which include 6 million doses of Moderna vaccine and more than 33.6 million doses of Pfizer vaccine. In addition to vaccine donation, the USAID has also provided over US\$22.46 million in COVID-19 assistance to Hanoi to procure health facilities, accelerate equitable access to and delivery of safe and effective doses of COVID-19 vaccine and help strengthen Vietnam's capacity in responding to the pandemic (Tuoi Tre 2022; US Agency for International Development 2022). Meanwhile, China's donation is much more dwindled compared to that of the USA. To be specific, China has donated 7.3 million doses to Vietnam, all of which were donated bilaterally but not through the COVAX facility (Tuoi Tre 2022).

Interestingly enough, in each shipment of donated vaccines to Vietnam, the USA has sought to convey a message that US donation of vaccines to Vietnam represents close friendship with no strings attached, just aiming to beat back the COVID-19 pandemic together (US Embassy in Hanoi 2021). This approach of narrating about US vaccine donation is obviously used to delegitimise Chinese vaccine donation to Vietnam and send a warning to Vietnamese leaders about China's hidden intentions given growing accusations about conditionality or bonded conditions have been found within China's vaccine donation packages to other countries. For example, Paraguay's foreign ministry said in a statement in March 2021 that China required the Paraguayan government to cut ties with Taiwan in exchange for vaccines (Horton and Parks 2021). In March 2021, Brazil suddenly changed its stance of excluding Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant from its 5G auctions after the Brazilian communications minister went to Beijing in February to ask for vaccines from China (Londoño and Casado 2021).

Apart from vaccine donations, vaccine manufacturing technology transfer is also a crucial area within the first approach in US-China proxy competition in Vietnam. While there has been no clue whether or not China would share its vaccine technology with Vietnam, the USA has taken a first step in transferring mRNA vaccine technology to Vietnam. For example, the US-based Arcturus Therapeutics was reported to be producing an mRNA vaccine in partnership with Vingroup, Vietnam's largest conglomerate. Currently, phase 3 trial is being conducted in Vietnam, and mass production is expected to start in early 2022 (Jibiki and Onishi 2021).

For the latter approach of proxy competition, it is believed that the USA played a critical role behind Japan, European countries, Australia and other Western countries' generous donation of vaccines to Vietnam. By the end of April 2022, the EU and Japan, the second and fourth-largest donor of vaccines to Hanoi, have respectively donated to Vietnam more than 22 and 5.6 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine (Tuoi Tre 2022). Further, on the first-ever meeting of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) leaders from the USA, Australia, India and Japan on 12 March 2021, the four leaders inked the *Quad Vaccine Partnership*, which was designed to expand vaccine manufacturing, strengthen and assist developing countries in the Indo-Pacific region with vaccination, with a particular focus on Southeast Asia (White House 2021a). Among those, Vietnam is a focal point and important partner to all of these four QUAD states; thus, the USA, in close collaborations with Japan, Australia and the COVAX facility, has respectively provided the country with a growing number of vaccines (Tuoi Tre 2022).

Meanwhile, China was also assumed to endorse Cambodia's donations of Chinese-made vaccines to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states. As one of China's closest allies in the region, Cambodia has been China's major vaccine recipient in Southeast Asia, with which over 90% of vaccines used for its vaccination were procured from or donated by China (Xinhua Net 2021). After Cambodia had received an ample supply of Chinese vaccines, it started donating vaccines to Laos and Vietnam—the two communist states that China expects to induce. For example, on 29 October 2021, Cambodia handed over 200,000 doses of the Chinese-made Sinopharm vaccine to Vietnam (Kunthea 2021). Although it is still unclear how Beijing specifically coordinated or engaged Phnom Penh in its efforts to donate Chinese-made vaccines to Vietnam and other countries, Cambodia's generous acts could not be materialised without China's endorsement and continuous support of vaccines. At the *Handover Ceremony of*

COVID-19 vaccines donated by China to Cambodia on 17 November 2021, Chinese Ambassador in Cambodia Wang Wentian bluntly said that with China's provision of vaccines, Cambodia has never experienced a vaccine shortage (Chinese Embassy in Cambodia 2021). Further, Prime Minister Hun Sen revealed that the Cambodian Ministry of Health had been working closely with the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh regarding building a COVID-19 vaccine production factory in Cambodia to produce vaccines for Cambodia's domestic use and distribution to other countries in the region (Vantha 2021).

Vietnam's practical responses to US-China vaccine diplomacy

In response to the US-China proxy competition waged through vaccine donation, Vietnam has adopted a two-level responding pattern, both at the international level and domestic level. Several criteria used to examine Vietnam's response at these two levels were listed in the above second section. Specifically, for the international level, this paper elaborates on Vietnamese authorities' overall attitude and actions *vis-à-vis* the USA and China. As for the domestic level, state-society discrepancies, particularly the public's view, as well as Vietnamese authorities' domestic handling of donated vaccines will be investigated. Vietnam has constantly had to strike a balance between how to meet the domestic demands and respond reasonably to both the USA and China regarding the procurement and receiving of their donation of vaccines.

At the international level, although Hanoi's overall responses to the vaccine donations from Washington and Beijing have been positive and welcoming, its approaches were slightly different. In the initial stages of ratification and procurement of foreign vaccines, Vietnam showed a high preference for US-made and Western-made vaccines rather than Chinese-made vaccines. In particular, prior to the official ratification of COVID-19 vaccines, Vietnam Ministry of Health in a press conference on 4 January 2021 disclosed that Vietnam was negotiating with four countries, specifically the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, and China to procure vaccines. Nevertheless, while AstraZeneca, Pfizer/BioNTech, and Sputnik V were particularly mentioned, there was no mention of any particular Chinese-made vaccine at that time (Vietnam Ministry of Health 2021).

Furthermore, Vietnam's preference for US-made vaccines prompted the country to sign procurement contracts with US-based vaccine producers much earlier than its official ratification date of these vaccines and of Chinese-made vaccines. For instance, Vietnam inked a deal with the US-based Pfizer vaccine producer in May 2021 to guarantee the supply of 31 million doses, roughly a month before the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was officially approved for its domestic inoculation programme in June 2021 (Nguyen and Mai 2021). In contrast, due to its domestic rising anti-China sentiment as well as anti-Chinese vaccines among the public, it was not until 3 June 2021 was the Sino-pharm-made Vero Cell vaccine approved for emergency use in Vietnam (Le 2021). This made Vietnam become one of the last ASEAN countries to ratify a Chinese-made vaccine.

Vietnam's high preference for US-made vaccines can also be observed from Vietnam's high-level leaders' proactive approach toward the USA amid global vaccine scarcity. For example, Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc directly sent two official letters to the US President Joe Biden in May and October 2021, respectively, not only to express

gratitude toward the USA for its donation of vaccines, medicine and medical supplies, and equipment to Vietnam, but also to urge the Biden administration to facilitate the US vaccine manufacturers' soon delivery of vaccines to Vietnam, as well as call for vaccine manufacturing technology transfers (Kim Anh 2021; Vietnam Net 2021). Vietnamese top leaders' taking initiative in writing a direct letter to the US president is not often seen in Vietnam-US relations. Thus, this proactive move of Hanoi not only indicates its desperate need for vaccines at the height of the pandemic; but more importantly, it implies that Vietnam's greater confidence in the USA in recent years has made it believe that using this type of 'interpersonal letter exchanges' to seek more vaccine supplies from the USA could work.

The US generous donation of vaccines to Vietnam during tough times greatly generated strategic trust in Vietnam. To return the US goodwill, Vietnam repeatedly hailed the US timely donation, keeping stressing that Vietnam-US bilateral relations have been prosperous in all aspects like never before. Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc told US Vice President Harris in August 2021 that the US donations were 'extremely precious and meaningful' given Vietnam faced huge difficulties in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic (Vietnam Plus 2021b). In response to Harris's mentioning of upgrading US-Vietnam relationship to a 'strategic partnership,' President Phuc stated that Vietnam always regards the USA as one of its top crucial partners and wishes to work with the USA to continue promoting the US-Vietnam relations (BBC Vietnamese 2021; Vietnam Plus 2021b). Although Vietnamese leaders remained cautious about Harris's suggestion, Vietnamese strategists and scholars spoke on official media that Vietnam-US relationship has already been at a strategic level, and so the designation of this bilateral relationship is simply a question of time (Pham 2021).

Vietnam's expressing gratitude is not only confined to 'words' or 'lip service,' but it tends to pay the USA something specific in return. Alternatively put, vaccine diplomacy contributed to pushing the US's specific foreign policy objectives. For instance, on 19 July 2021, the USA and Vietnam reached a new agreement on monetary policy, in which Vietnam pledged not to manipulate exchange rates and deliberately weaken its *Vietnam Dong* currency to gain an unfair competitive advantage in export. Vietnam's act was highly hailed by US Trade Representative Katherine Tai as 'setting an important example for the Indo-Pacific region' (US Trade Representative 2021). It is worth noting that, the US first batch of 2-million dose vaccine donation just arrived in Hanoi on 10 July (Minh Nga 2021). More strikingly, only three days after the agreement with Vietnam had been made, the USA announced an additional donation of 3 million more doses of the Moderna vaccine to Vietnam on 22 July (Reuters 2021). Another important example is that the USA gained Vietnam's implicit endorsement to its newly formed trilateral security pact, *AUKUS*, with Australia and the United Kingdom in September 2021, following its generous vaccine donations to Vietnam and subsequent progress in US-Vietnam strategic trust. Unlike Indonesia's and Malaysia's opposing stances, Vietnam neither opposed nor expressed concerns about this pact. Vietnamese spokesperson only generally stated on 23 September 2021 that peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world are common goals of all countries (Hung Cuong 2021). Prudent as it is, Vietnam's stance denotes its endorsement of the US security presence in the region.

In the case of China's vaccine donation, as the pandemic in Vietnam exacerbated, the country eventually conditionally ratified the Sinopharm Vero Cell vaccine on 3 June 2021, making it the last country in Southeast Asia to approve a Chinese-made vaccine. One day after on 4 June 2021, in a virtual meeting with Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh expressed the hope that China would cooperate with and assist Vietnam in realising its vaccine strategy (Tien 2021). As China started sending vaccines to Vietnam, the country also expressed its high appreciation for Chinese donations as it did to the USA. Particularly, in exchange for the Chinese announcement of donating additional 2 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine on 24 August 2021, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh told the Chinese Ambassador in Vietnam, Xiong Bo that, Vietnam has always valued its traditional friendship and comprehensive strategic partnership with China. Vietnam adheres to the foreign policy of independence, multilateralism, diversification, and proactive integration into the international community, being a responsible member of the international community, and 'does not ally with one country to fight against another,' according to Vietnamese media (Anh Ngoc 2021).

Taken together, both Washington and Beijing have sought to leverage their vaccines to influence Hanoi in different ways, and both have gained something in return. For the USA, the deployment of vaccine diplomacy to Vietnam helped to promote strategic trust between the two countries and create an image of a 'saviour' or a 'friend indeed' in the hearts of many Vietnamese people. In comparison, although China's vaccine donation to Vietnam was often under skepticism, it acted as a wedge to keep Vietnam at a particular distance from the USA and prevent Hanoi from further spiralling into the US-led coalition against Beijing.

For Vietnam, the country does not expect its soil to become a battle for the strategic rivalry between the USA and China. However, as Hanoi has received vaccine donations from both sides, it has to balance between the two giants and keep their faces simultaneously. To illustrate, on the visit to Vietnam in August 2021, US Vice President Kamala Harris was believed to call on Vietnam to join the USA in 'raising the pressure on Beijing's actions and challenging its bullying and excessive maritime claims' (BBC Vietnamese 2021). However, there was no mention of such content in the Vietnamese media report given Vietnamese authorities only allowed a small number of media to listen to the opening remarks and take photos of the two parties in the first few minutes of the meeting between US Vice President Kamala Harris and Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc. Obviously, Hanoi did not expect that Harris's grave criticism against Beijing made in Hanoi would further antagonise Beijing and may undermine Vietnam-China relations.

At the same time, facing China's lure into its united front against 'external forces,' Vietnam also remained cautious and sought to save the face for the USA. On 11 September 2021, in a meeting with Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh in Hanoi, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that China and Vietnam should 'jointly resist the smears and attacks against socialist countries by external forces, safeguard our common interests, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs ...,' according to a press release on China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China MOFA 2021). Clearly, Wang Yi wanted to play the card of ideological affinity to induce Vietnam to the Chinese side. Yet, Wang Yi's speech was not fully reported in

Vietnamese official media. News on the *Vietnamese Government Portal (Bao Chinh Phu)* only selectively quoted and deleted many excessive parts of Wang Yi's speech. Instead, it quoted Pham Minh Chinh's remarks, pointing out that Vietnam always attaches importance to the development of relations with China and regards relations with China as the top priority in its foreign policy; hoping China would continue to donate more vaccines, transfer technology to produce COVID-19 vaccines and drugs, and materialise vaccine sales contracts to meet Vietnam's needs (Ha Van 2021). By doing this (selectively reporting Wang Yi's speech), Vietnam also wanted to demonstrate that its development of the relationship with China would not undermine the current good relations with the USA.

In addition to direct responses to the USA and China at the international level, how Vietnam narrates or propagates domestically about vaccine donations from these two countries as well as the distribution policy of these donated vaccines, can also act as important indicators to conceptualise Vietnam's overall practical responses to US-China vaccine diplomacy. The attitude and reaction of Vietnamese authorities regarding these issues are put at the domestic level, which has witnessed significant discrepancies between the government and the public. How Vietnamese people perceive each side's vaccines could, to some extent, constrain and shape Vietnamese authorities' response to the US-China vaccine diplomacy battle.

Overall, Vietnamese people hold a relatively negative attitude toward Chinese vaccines while enthusiastically embracing Western vaccines, as can be seen from both mainstream and social media discussions. When news about Vietnam's conditional ratification of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine was reported on *VnExpress*, the most-read Vietnamese online newspaper on 4 June 2021, an overwhelming majority of Vietnamese readers expressed grave concerns and suspicions about the quality and efficacy of the Sinopharm vaccine (Le 2021). In 286 reader comments below this news article, more than 90% of the readers bluntly said that they were not willing to get Chinese jabs and would rather wait to get Western vaccines, according to the author's own statistics. Another interesting example is, regarding China's donation of 500,000 Sinopharm vaccine doses to Vietnam on 20 June, with a bonded condition about who could get Chinese jabs, some Vietnamese opinion leaders on *Facebook* criticised that Chinese donation was simply a hoax because Beijing only sought to utilise Vietnam's medical resources to get Chinese nationals in Vietnam vaccinated. Rather than criticism, many Vietnamese people were sarcastically pleased with the bonded condition. They supposed that these donated vaccines were only for Chinese citizens and other particular individuals; hence, they would not be required to get Chinese jabs (Giang 2021). Given the public's clear-cut preference for Western vaccines and distrust of Chinese vaccines, Vietnamese authorities have been especially cautious about propagating and distributing the received vaccines across the country. Different domestic policies toward the US's and China's donated vaccines were found, accordingly.

Regarding the propagating strategy, the Vietnamese government adopted different tactics in narrating and reporting about US-made and Chinese-made vaccines. While Vietnamese official media were allowed to report extensively and intensively about US-made and Western-made vaccines in general and each batch of US vaccine donation to Vietnam in particular, the media tended to keep a rather low profile when reporting about Chinese vaccine donation. Plus, almost all reports about Chinese vaccines were translated from foreign media while relevant discussions and Vietnamese experts'

analyses regarding Chinese-made vaccines in Vietnam were relatively muted during the first few months of 2021. On the one hand, selective reporting aimed to prevent the public from thinking that Vietnam is being dumped with Chinese-made vaccines. But on the other hand, this inevitably made the Vietnamese public less receptive to Chinese vaccines given most of the reported information was about low efficacy and foreign experts' suspicion of Chinese-made vaccines (Phuc Long 2021).

Later, Vietnamese authorities gradually changed their propagating strategy as it faced difficulties in obtaining Western vaccines due to the global vaccine shortage at the height of its domestic pandemic, and this forced Hanoi to diversify its vaccine portfolios by resorting to Chinese-made vaccines. Nevertheless, widespread anti-Chinese vaccine sentiment caused many Vietnamese people reluctant to get administered, posing a challenge to Vietnam's vaccination plan. Consequently, Vietnamese authorities were prompted to introduce new propaganda to the Vietnamese public by saying that, '*the best vaccine is the first one: get vaccinated when it's your turn*,' designed to call on more people to receive the Chinese jabs (Thanh Son 2021).

Public opinion's preference also affected the government's distribution of donated vaccines from the USA and China across the country. Specifically, for several places where anti-Chinese vaccine sentiment was high, the authorities would allocate more Western-made or US-made vaccines. Meanwhile, Chinese vaccines would be distributed to provinces that either are bordered by China or have no alternative but to get Chinese jabs. To illustrate, as the pandemic got worse in the south, in July 2021, Vietnam Ministry of Health secured a deal to have *Sapharco*—a Ho Chi Minh-based pharmaceutical company procure 5 million doses of Sinopharm vaccine. This batch of vaccines was then delivered to Ho Chi Minh City between late July and early August 2021; however, due to widespread anti-China sentiment, Ho Chi Minh citizens were reluctant to get Chinese-made vaccines, many were said to have left the vaccination points within the city when they discovered that Vero Cell vaccine was actually from China. Given this, Ho Chi Minh City later decided to dispatch part of this batch to other cities and provinces even though it was facing vaccine shortage (Thanh Giang 2021).

Alternatively, in the following months, a majority of vaccines that Ho Chi Minh City received were Western-made vaccines, while Chinese-made vaccines were distributed to Binh Duong—a province adjacent to Ho Chi Minh City, which was desperate for vaccines at that time to re-open its industrial zones. Furthermore, as China started donating more vaccines to Vietnam during August 2021, most of them were respectively provided to Hanoi and other provinces in the north of Vietnam, but not to Ho Chi Minh City (Minh Vu 2021). It is thus drawn that Vietnamese authorities' domestic distribution policy of donated vaccines from the USA and China has been somehow constrained by public opinion. This also added up to the country's overall cautious attitude toward Chinese-made vaccines while keeping embracing Western and US-made vaccines.

The above discussions suggest that there is a split between Vietnam's response at the international and domestic levels, particularly in response to Chinese-made vaccines, the split is larger. Domestic issues with anti-Chinese vaccine sentiment might be a driving force behind this international-domestic split. Overwhelming suspicions about Chinese-made vaccines, which resulted from concerns about the quality and efficacy of Chinese vaccines as well as deep-rooted anti-China sentiment among Vietnamese people, constituted an overall reluctant attitude of the Vietnamese government toward

Chinese-made vaccines in the early stages. This led Vietnam to actively seek Western vaccines while being slow in ratifying and buying Chinese vaccines. Afterward, although Chinese vaccines were ratified and widely used, lingering anti-Chinese vaccine sentiment pushed the Vietnamese authorities to adjust their propaganda and distribution policy throughout the country. However, the impact of Vietnamese public opinion has mostly been prominent at the domestic level, but not at the international level. Simply put, Vietnamese people's negative perception of Chinese vaccines has not fundamentally impacted Vietnam's relationship with China. The fact is, although the degree of receptiveness to Chinese vaccines is lower than that of Western and US vaccines, China could still reap its strategic goals *vis-à-vis* Vietnam in terms of preventing the latter from further leaning on the USA.

In lieu of conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic keeps ravaging countries around the world, vaccine-related issues have become increasingly critical. One question arising here is that the outbreak of the pandemic as well as the subsequent advent of the COVID-19 vaccine chimes closely in a turbulent period, in which the US-China geostrategic competition is intensifying globally. Against this backdrop, major powers like the USA and China are less reluctant to leverage the COVID-19 vaccine, a strategic asset at hand—to either lure or influence other small and middle powers in a manner that serves the larger powers' benefits. The implementation of vaccine diplomacy is particularly prominent in Southeast Asia, where US-China strategic interests clash. The competition is relatively intense in Vietnam—a growing middle power in the region and a focal point within the US-China all-out rivalry.

In this paper, the competition between the USA and China by means of the COVID-19 vaccine is addressed as a 'proxy competition.' Like the situation in other countries, the proxy competition waged through vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam is undertaken in two primary ways. The first way is that the USA and China both donated vaccines to Vietnam through both bilateral channels and multilateral mechanisms, to seek greater influence. The second way refers to both sides' relying on their existing network of allies, friends, and partners to deploy their vaccine diplomacy in Vietnam.

Cognizant of the fierce competition on its soil, Vietnam has no alternative but to accept vaccine donations from both sides given its grave domestic pandemic as well as global vaccine shortage. Nevertheless, there is no such free lunch. Although Vietnam has worked to balance between the two major powers and sought to keep its decision-making independent of US-China influence, evidence is growing that Hanoi, either explicitly or implicitly, has to do something to show its gratitude toward Washington and Beijing's goodwill during hard times. Specifically, in addition to strengthening strategic trust, the US vaccine diplomacy helped it to achieve specific foreign goals with Vietnam such as reaching a new agreement on monetary policy and gaining Vietnam's endorsement for its security presence in the region. Meanwhile, China's vaccine donation also contributed to constraining Vietnam's efforts in beefing up relations with the USA, particularly in terms of security and military cooperation.

Another crucial variable that affects Vietnam's attitude toward US-China vaccine diplomacy is Vietnamese public opinion. How to strike a balance between the public's preference for Western and US-made vaccines and distrust of Chinese-made vaccines

has constantly been a tough test for Vietnamese decision-makers. In the foreseeable future, as the pandemic lingers, vaccine-related issues will still be a hot matter for debates in international affairs. As such, Vietnam tends to diversify its vaccine supplies coupled with speeding up the mass production of its homemade vaccines. Only when these goals are reached can Vietnam maintain its autonomy in the process of its foreign policy decision-making.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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